CR ConsumerReports®

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ConsumerReports®

On Health

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Making Food Packaging Safer

Soon, risky 'forever chemicals' won't be allowed

PFAS (PER- AND POLYFLUOROALKYL substances)—dubbed "forever chemicals" because they linger in the environment—have been linked to issues like immune system suppression and a higher risk of some cancers. They've been commonly used in food packaging from takeout chains and supermarkets. In fact, Consumer Reports' tests of more than 100 wrappers and containers from such venues found many with high levels of PFAS.

But manufacturers have now stopped selling food packaging coatings that contain PFAS. "This represents a positive step," says Brian Ronholm, CR's director of food policy. Packaging is the "food contact" material most likely to cause PFAS to migrate into items we eat and into our bodies, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Still, this won't eliminate all PFAS exposure. Food and water may sometimes contain PFAS. Existing PFAS-laden packaging is expected to still be used for some time. And PFAS are widely used in items like nonstick cookware and some cosmetics. Plus, PFAS are found in recycled paper products and may be used in ways not currently addressed by the FDA, such as in ink on the side of a package. "It would be more reassuring if they took steps to ban the use of all PFAS in food packaging," Ronholm says.

It's possible to limit exposure by avoiding certain products, as well as dust, and treating your drinking water. (See video link below.)

SCAN THIS QR CODE *for a video on limiting your PFAS exposure.*

THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

We contact health authorities and medical researchers from across the country. Here are some of the experts we consulted this month:

Bethany Austin, MD, co-medical director, Heart Failure Program and Heart Failure Quality, Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute, Kansas City, Mo.

Celine Beitchman, director of nutrition, Institute of Culinary Education, New York City.

Ronald Chervin, MD, chief, division of sleep medicine, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Laura Harnish, RDN, clinical dietitian, Outpatient Nutrition Counseling Services team, UPMC Presbyterian Shadyside, Pittsburgh.

Alan Hedge, PhD, professor emeritus, department of Human Centered Design, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.

Gregory Hinrichsen, PhD, professor, geriatrics and palliative medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York City.

Brienne Miner, MD, geriatrician and sleep medicine physician, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Conn.

Kelly Morrow, RDN, affiliate instructor, Osher Center for Integrative Health, University of Washington, Seattle.

David Raichlen, PhD, professor, biological sciences and anthropology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

PHOTOS, COVER, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY IMAGES (3). PHOTO, THIS PAGE: DEBBI SMIRNOFF/GETTY IMAGES

Health Wire

Making Music Can Protect Your Brain

Singing with a group or playing an instrument as you get older has been linked to better scores on executive function tests, according to a study. The researchers say that renewing an earlier-in-life musical interest could be beneficial, too.

Source: International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, Jan. 28, 2024.

DROWSY DRIVING NEWS

If you feel sleepy while driving, it could be a sign of obstructive sleep apnea, so alert your doctor. In new research, people with untreated OSA were about six times more likely than those without the condition to have been in a traffic accident. Getting treated for OSA cuts the risk.

Source: ERJ Open Research, Jan. 22, 2024.

Surprising Weight Loss? Tell a Doctor.

People who unintentionally lost 10 percent or more of their body weight over two years were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with cancer within the next year, a recent study found. While the cancer risk was small, experts say it's important to let your doctor know about such weight loss, which can also be caused by other issues.

Source: JAMA, Jan. 23, 2024.

HOT WEATHER AND DIABETES

People with diabetes who take certain medications for the condition may need to take extra care to protect themselves in hot, humid weather. In a recent study, volunteers who rely on insulin or some sulfonylurea drugs were up to 38 percent more likely to experience dangerously low blood sugar when heat and humidity were high.

Source: Diabetes Care, Dec. 7, 2023.

Eat to Prevent COVID?

Consuming plenty of fruit, vegetables, beans, and nuts and limiting meat was associated with a 39 percent lower risk of COVID-19 in a study of 702 adults. The researchers say a plant-based diet provides more of the compounds that strengthen immunity. But some experts say it's too soon to conclude that such eating plans prevent the disease.

Source: BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health, Jan. 9, 2024.

Tips for Better Balance

Older women who got at least 30 minutes of physical activity (like a brisk walk) five times a week had a 26 percent lower risk of a fall than those who were less active, according to an Australian study of 7,139 women with an average age of 67. The exercisers were also 30 percent less likely to have a fall that caused an injury compared with those who were more sedentary. Staying as active as possible may help prevent trips and slips by improving balance and endurance and by maintaining muscle strength.

Source: JAMA Network Open, Jan. 31, 2024.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (4)

How to Sleep Better Now

The right exercise, diet, and schedule can really improve your slumber

A DECENT NIGHT'S SLEEP can be surprisingly elusive as the years pass. In fact, some research suggests that as many as half of people ages 60 and older have trouble sleeping compared with only about 20 percent of younger folks.

And sufficient slumber is essential in many ways. For instance, a 2023 study published in the journal Clinical Cardiology found that people with insomnia are more likely to have heart attacks. A 2022 study published in the journal Sleep found that insomnia raises the odds of subjective memory decline in middle-aged and older adults. And driving while sleepy is a danger to people of all ages.

If you have trouble falling and/or staying asleep, the following steps can usually help. "You may not be able to sleep like a baby again, but oftentimes older adults are able to improve their sleep with some simple lifestyle changes," says Meir Kryger, MD, professor emeritus at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven.

Check Your Overall Health

If you have chronic insomnia—sleep troubles at least three nights a week for more than three months—see your doctor. "You want to get a full checkup to make sure other undiagnosed health issues, like an enlarged prostate or Parkinson's disease, aren't what's keeping you up," says Ronald Chervin, MD, chief of the division of sleep medicine at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. If your doctor doesn't find an underlying health problem, Chervin advises asking for a referral to a sleep specialist. A 2023 study published in the Journal of PeriAnesthesia Nursing found that about a third of people ages 65 and older have obstructive sleep apnea, which is marked by breathing pauses during sleep. Sleep disorders like restless legs syndrome may also be more common with age.

Train Your Brain

The more consistent your sleep schedule, the better your sleep (and health) will be. That makes going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time each day vital to good sleep. "Our brains get used to daily rhythms, so having a regular bedtime and wake-up time is helpful, even if you don't need to be anywhere," says Brienne Miner, MD, a geriatrician and sleep medicine physician at the Yale School of Medicine.

Exercise, Even at Night

Working out "doesn't just allow you to fall asleep faster, it improves the quality of your sleep as well," Miner says. And contrary to popular belief, most people can exercise in the evening without disrupting their sleep later. "Patients ask me about this, and I tell them it doesn't matter when, just that they get out and do some sort of activity." A 2019 review of 23 studies found that exercising at night didn't have a negative impact on sleep as long as people didn't do vigorous activity (such as running) within an hour of bedtime.

The more you can do, the better. The general (not sleep-specific) recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is that older adults get at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity activity, such as brisk walking, and at least two muscle-strengthening sessions per week. That doesn't have to mean lifting weights. Yoga, for instance, qualifies.

Skip Before-Bed Goodies

It's wise to avoid alcohol—which interferes with sleep quality—within 3 hours of bedtime. Try to skip caffeine after noon.

ILLUSTRATIONS: FRAN PULIDO

It's also a good idea to stop eating anything an hour or two before bed. A 2022 study published in the British Journal of Nutrition found an association between nighttime noshing and poor sleep. If you want a small snack, consider one that contains melatonin, such as cherries or kiwifruit. And try to load up your daily diet with produce, whole grains, seafood, beans, and healthy fats, such as those found in olive oil and nuts. A 2022 review published in the journal Nutrients found that this eating style was associated with improved sleep quality.

Need a Nap? Be Strategic.

A daytime nap may refresh you, and some evidence suggests there may be cognitive benefits to an after-lunch snooze. But it can also make it that much harder to doze off at night. If you do nap during the day, target 15 to 20 minutes and not much more, Chervin says, so it doesn't interfere with nighttime slumber. Keeping a nap short will also prevent you from sinking into a deep sleep and reduce the likelihood that you'll wake up from it groggy.

Restrict Your Sleep Time

"Older adults often can't fall asleep, so they end up staying in bed for 11 hours, which only stresses them out more," says Gregory Hinrichsen, PhD, a professor of geriatrics and palliative medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. So if you can't fall asleep after 15 to 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something relaxing like reading, Kryger recommends. Once you feel sleepy, go back to your bedroom.

You might try a few days of sleep restriction, which was found to be very effective for older adults with insomnia in a 2022 study co-authored by Hinrichsen. "That means if you go to bed at 11 p.m. and get out of bed at 8 a.m. but only get about 6 hours of sleep a night, you shorten the time you are in bed to midnight to 6 a.m.," Hinrichsen says. After two or three nights with no daytime naps, you'll be tired enough to fall asleep more quickly. Increase the time you spend in bed by 15 to 30 minutes every few days.

Take an Evening Bath

Just as young children often have a wind-down hour before bed, give yourself time in the evening to relax, perhaps with a warm bath. A 2019 review in Sleep Medicine Reviews concluded that this helps people nod off faster and sleep better. Then follow it with a calming activity you enjoy: reading, listening to soft music, or doing deep breathing exercises. "The most important thing is to get off your iPhone or iPad," Hinrichsen says. "It's not just the blue light from the devices that keeps you up, either. It's the stress and stimulation of sending and receiving texts and emails, too." Finally, keep your bedroom dark, quiet, and on the cool side.

LEARN

For tips on how to relax at night, got to **CR.org/relaxation**.

WHEN A LATER BEDTIME HELPS

A lot of us find that we start to nod off early (like 8 p.m.) as we get older, and in turn wake up extremely early in the morning. If this works for you, fine.

But if it's not ideal, try tweaking your sleep cycle so you get tired an hour or two later (and wake up at a more convenient time).

One method is to delay your body's production of melatonin (the "sleep hormone"). To do this, spend a total of 30 minutes to an hour in bright light in both the late afternoon and early evening. You can go out for walks while it's still light outside, but even exposing yourself to the blue light from your iPhone, tablet, or computer will help. You can also ask your doctor about using a lightbox, which produces light similar to sunlight.

Make any shift in your bedtime schedule gradually, says Meir Kryger, MD. If you usually doze off at 8 p.m., for example, start by trying to move it to 8:15, then, two to three nights later, to 8:30. Over time, your body should adjust.

THE PROBLEM WITH SLEEP MEDS

Generally, neither over-the-counter nor prescription sleep drugs are advised for older adults. "As we age, our metabolism of drugs changes, so medications may cause more side effects," says Meir Kryger, MD. Side effects can include confusion and memory problems, and sleep drugs may hike your fall risk (say, if you wake up to go to the bathroom).

What about occasional short-term use? There may be situations—such as a death in the family—where you may need a prescription sleep drug for a short period, says Brienne Miner, MD. But they shouldn't be used for more than two weeks.

If sleep issues linger, alert your doctor. They may be able to rule out underlying medical issues, help with lifestyle tips, and, if needed, refer you for cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia. CBT-I, recommended for chronic insomnia by groups like the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, helps reduce thoughts and behavior that contribute to sleep woes.

Eat Less Sodium Without Losing Flavor

Food can still taste great, with the right spices

YOU'VE HEARD IT BEFORE: Go easy on the salt. "Reducing sodium is something we should all focus on because keeping intake low is clearly linked to better health—especially heart health," says Kate Kirley, MD, director of the American Medical Association's chronic disease prevention programs.

But it's something that many people struggle with. Skipping the salt shaker isn't enough. Most of the sodium we get comes from packaged and restaurant foods, and it adds up fast. Plus, older adults often have a reduced sense of taste, so they may gravitate toward saltier foods. Not sure where to start? These tips will help get you on the right track.

Tally Your Sodium Intake

On average, Americans consume more than 3,400 mg of sodium daily. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans says everyone should get less than 2,300 mg. The American Heart Association's limit is 1,500 mg, especially for people with high blood pressure. But according to the AHA, 97 percent of Americans either don't know or underestimate their sodium intake. Check labels to see how much sodium is in a serving of foods you buy. "As we age, sodium's effect on blood pressure becomes ever more important," Kirley says. "If you can cut 1,000 mg of sodium out of your diet per day, you can reduce your systolic blood pressure by about 6 mmHg."

Limit Processed and Restaurant Foods

A whopping 71 percent of our sodium intake comes from packaged foods and restaurant meals. Cooking from scratch can help you eat significantly less sodium. For example, Michelina's Stir Fry Rice & Vegetables with White Chicken frozen meal has 780 mg of sodium. If you made your own chicken stir-fry with rice and veggies, you could slash that by about half, even if you used a little salt and lower-sodium soy sauce.

Rethink Sandwiches

Cold cuts and bread are two of the biggest sources of sodium in older adults' diets, an analysis of National Health and Nutrition Examination survey data published in 2023 found. Bread may be surprising because it doesn't really taste salty, but a single slice of Oroweat 22 Whole Grains & Seeds bread, for instance, has 220 mg of sodium. Use two slices in a sandwich and you've already consumed about 20 percent of the daily sodium limit. Putting on a few slices of ham and cheese adds at least 1,000 mg, and a teaspoon of mustard has 115 mg. The result: a sandwich that single-handedly pushes your sodium consumption over 1,500 mg. You don't have to give up sandwiches, though. Instead, seek out lower-sodium breads or wraps and fill them with things like hummus or homemade roasted turkey breast, plus lots of fresh veggies.

Double-Check Your Sweets

Salt has always been part of baking, but the trend toward salty-sweet desserts has added extra sodium to things like chocolate chip cookies. For example, one Pepperidge Farm Newport Dark Chocolate with Sea Salt cookie contains 120 mg of sodium, 45 mg more than a non-salted version. Salt is also used to improve texture and as a preservative, so it's worth checking the labels on your baked goods to find treats that have the least added sodium.

Explore Other Seasonings

"Get creative with herbs and other flavors," says Celine Beitchman, director of nutrition at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. "Foods that add umami are especially satisfying, so you're less likely to miss the saltiness." She suggests balsamic vinegar, nut and seed oils, a sprinkle of aged cheese, citrus juice or zest, garlic, and fresh chives as options. You can also try a salt substitute. (Morton Lite Salt 50% Less Sodium came close to the real thing, a CR taste test found.) If you use salt, add it to food instead of during cooking, she says. "The salty flavor is more pronounced if you add a pinch of flaky sea salt to a dish at the table."

LEARN

For information on salt substitutes, go to CR.org/saltsubs.

PHOTO: GREGORY REID/GALLERY STOCK

Enjoy Life, Even With Heart Failure

The 5 most important things to do

SOME 6.7 MILLION Americans live with heart failure, a chronic condition in which the heart can't pump as well as it should. This can lead to fluid buildup in your lungs and limbs, shortness of breath, fatigue, and swelling in areas like your legs. "I describe it as an inefficiency of the heart," says Bethany Austin, MD, co-medical director of the Heart Failure Program and Heart Failure Quality at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, Mo.

A few strategies can improve your quality of life and help keep the condition from worsening. "Heart failure means your heart needs some help doing its normal job," Austin says. In addition to following a treatment plan, which may include drugs to reduce fluid and help your heart pump more effectively, try the following.

Check Your Meds

Some medications for heart failure, such as diuretics, can make you tired, while beta-blockers may affect your sleep. Ask your doctor about potential modifications if you think that's the case. (But don't stop taking prescribed drugs on your own.)

Balance Activity and Rest

Exercise can boost your energy and help you breathe and sleep better. But it's important to know when to put your feet up or nap. Ask your doctor what's safe and start slowly, perhaps marching in place for 5 to 15 minutes. Rest if you feel lightheaded, dizzy, short of breath, or weak, says Austin Workman, ACSM-EP, CCRP, an exercise specialist at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute. (Rest in a chair or prop yourself up with pillows rather than lying down.) Cardiac rehabilitation, which includes supervised exercise, can help you build endurance.

Try 'Breathe Easier' Tactics

If you're short of breath, it's helpful to do breathing exercises–such as slowly inhaling through your nose and out through pursed lips–until you can comfortably catch your breath again. Some research suggests that breath training and exercises that incorporate deep breathing, such as yoga and tai chi, may be useful in the long term. Ask your doctor.

Keep Fluid From Building Up

Check for fluid buildup by weighing yourself daily. Call your doctor if you gain 2 to 3 pounds in a day or 5 in a week. And consume only as much sodium and fluid as your doctor recommends. "Things that melt at room temperature, like ice cream," count as fluids, says Laura Harnish, RDN, a clinical dietitian on the Outpatient Nutrition Counseling Services team at UPMC Presbyterian Shadyside in Pittsburgh.

Get Better Sleep

Sleep problems are common among those with heart failure, and up to 75 percent may have sleep apnea, where breathing stops many times during sleep. (See page 4 for sleep tips.) If you suspect sleep apnea, ask a doctor about being tested, says Brittany Palmer, MD, a cardiologist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Heart and Vascular Institute and a clinical instructor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh.

FEELING DOWN? TRY THIS.

Living with heart failure can certainly affect your mood. "There's a huge emotional component," says Brittany Palmer, MD. Managing the condition can be stressful, and you may have fears about the possibility of worsening symptoms, which may interfere with sleep and make you feel anxious or depressed.

A low mood, in turn, can make sticking with healthy habits harder. Experts advise telling your doctor about your feelings and struggles and reaching out to supportive friends and family. "People are more likely to help you than to judge you," Palmer says. Counseling, notably cognitive behavioral therapy—which focuses on changing your feelings about and responses to challenging situations—may also help. In fact, a review of studies published in 2023 in the Journal of International Medical Research suggests that CBT can ease a person's mood, especially when therapy is done in person, not online.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Carbs That Are Good for You

The right ones keep weight under control and make you feel great

THESE DAYS, carbs are blamed for everything from weight gain to heart problems. Given this bad rap, it's no wonder that many people are cutting back on pasta, bread, and potatoes.

But the truth is you need carbs to function. They give your brain and body the energy they require to think and move, says Kelly Morrow, RDN, an affiliate instructor at the Osher Center for Integrative Health at the University of Washington in Seattle. "They also provide the fiber, nutrients, and fatty acids important for overall health."

The key is getting the right kind of carbs. That's because carbs are turned into sugar (glucose), and research shows that your body may have a harder time using glucose as you age. Over time, high blood sugar can set the stage for diabetes and other complications.

Processed and Whole Carbs

You often hear of carbohydrates being described as simple and complex. Simple carbs consist of chemical chains of one or two sugar molecules. Complex carbs, made up of longer molecular chains, are starches or fiber.

But the distinction isn't all that helpful when you're deciding which foods to eat. Not all simple carbs are unhealthy, and not all complex carbs are good for you. And the two types can be found in the same foods. For example, fruit contains natural sugars (simple carbs) along with fiber (a complex carb).

Instead, think processed vs. whole. Processed carbs are added sugars and white flour (and products made with them), white rice, potato chips, and fries. These are broken down and turned into energy quickly, causing a rapid spike in blood glucose levels, and often are low in nutrients and fiber. Over time, these spikes can lead to illness-causing chronic inflammation. In a 2010 study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, older women with the highest intake of quickly digested carbs were nearly three times as likely to die of an inflammatory disease, such as heart disease, as those who consumed the least.

Carbs in the form of whole foods–vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes–are the healthiest, says Morrow. They're digested more slowly, which helps prevent the blood sugar swings caused by refined carbs.

The fiber they contain also protects against a variety of diseases, and helps keep you full. One 2019 review of research published in The Lancet found that people who ate the most fiber-rich foods were 15 to 30 percent less likely to develop heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and colorectal cancer, or die from heart disease or stroke. What's more, fiber boosts "good" bacteria in the gut, which are linked to healthy digestion, better immune function, and overall health.

Resistant starches, found in oats and legumes (as well as cold pasta and rice), may have the same benefits. "These starches are similar to fiber," says Nate Wood, MD, a chef and instructor of medicine at Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Conn. "They aren't digested in the small intestine, so they don't raise blood sugar." Instead, they pass into the colon, where they feed the healthy gut bacteria.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (6)

How Many Carbs Do You Need?

The Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends 45 to 65 percent of your daily calories from carbs. That's 225 to 325 grams if you eat 2,000 calories a day. Aim to get nearly all of them from whole foods, says Wood. Keep added sugars to a minimum, too. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 25 grams a day for women and no more than 36 grams for men.

Should you go lower? On many popular low-carb diets, 25 to 30 percent of daily calories is the limit. "If you're trying to lose weight, low-carb diets do work in the short term," says Wood. But there's no long-term data showing that they're safe and effective, and "for a lot of people, it's not sustainable, and they gain the weight back," he says.

Even most people with blood glucose issues, such as diabetes, don't need to go low-carb. "One of the most-studied diets for metabolic health, the Mediterranean diet, gets 40 to 50 percent of calories from carbs," says Morrow. Of course, needs vary depending on your individual health, body, and activity level, she says.

Carbs in the form of whole foods are digested more slowly, which helps prevent the blood sugar swings caused by refined carbs.

Easy Ways to Keep Track

You don't need to count every single carb you eat. Instead, follow these easy steps:

› **Choose whole grains.** According to a 2021 Journal of Nutrition study, middle-aged and older adults who ate at least three servings of whole grains daily had smaller increases in blood pressure, blood sugar, and waist size over an 18-year span than those who ate less than half a serving.

› **Focus on fruits and vegetables.** Some are lower in carbs, such as spinach (1 gram per cup), broccoli (6 grams per cup), and strawberries (11 grams per cup). But there's no need to steer clear of those higher in starches and sugars, such as potatoes (26 grams per cup) or grapes (27 grams per cup). Just pay attention to the serving size, says Morrow.

› **Mix in plant-based protein.** Beans, nuts, and tofu serve up protein alongside carbs. One 2024 study found that women who got more plant-based protein saw notably less heart disease, cancer, and diabetes as they aged.

› **Pair carbs with protein and/or fat.** This can slow digestion, for steadier blood sugar, says Morrow. For instance, if you have crackers or pretzels, serve them with cheese, peanut butter, or hummus.

› **Spot sneaky added sugars.** These include sugar, syrups, and fruit juice, which supply calories and carbs but little nutrition. A diet high in added sugars ups the risks for diabetes, heart disease, and frailty. Check the "added sugars" line on Nutrition Facts labels, not just on desserts but also on less obvious foods like cereal, pasta sauce, salad dressing, and bread.

LEARN
For more on whole grains and how to use them, go to CR.org/wholegrains.

5 HEALTHY SWAPS THAT TASTE TERRIFIC

Ramp up the nutrition by switching out processed carbs for the options below

Instead of white rice, have quinoa or amaranth. Brown and wild rice are fiber-rich whole-grain options, but quinoa and amaranth also serve up plant-based protein (8 to 9 grams per cup of cooked grain).

Instead of potato chips, have corn tortilla chips. "Corn is a whole grain," says Wood, which makes corn chips a better choice. Still, they're fried, so keep a serving to about an ounce.

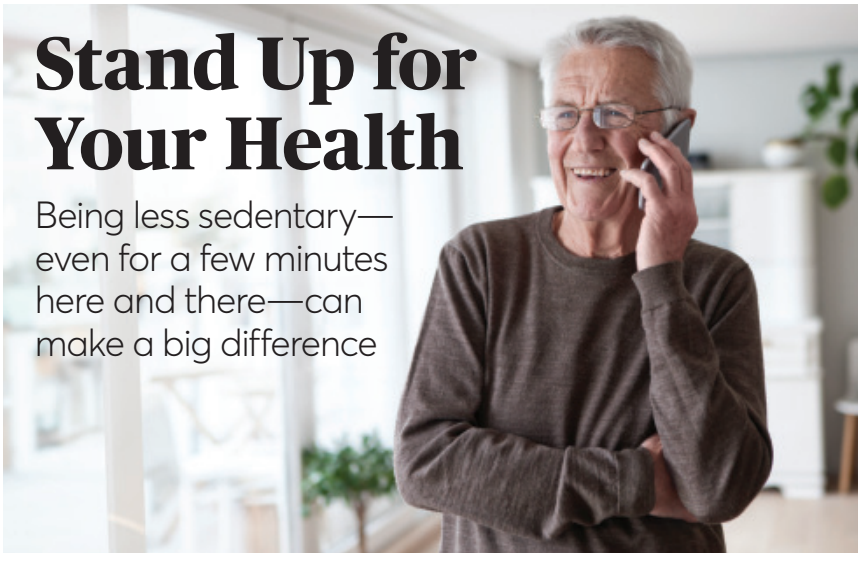
Instead of granola bars, have dates and peanut butter. Many granola bars are loaded with added sugars. For a better on-the-go treat, fill a pitted date with peanut butter. Naturally sweet dates are high in fiber and antioxidants.

Instead of plain pasta, try whole-grain or bean-based. If you haven't tried whole-grain pastas in a while, you may want to give them a second chance. There are some new options available that are tasty, and contain fiber and protein, says Wood.

Instead of breakfast cereal, eat oatmeal. Cold cereals, even whole-grain ones, often have added sugars. Start your morning with oatmeal, which contains fiber and resistant starches to stabilize blood sugar. Sweeten with fruit for extra fiber and vitamins.

Stand Up for Your Health

Being less sedentary—even for a few minutes here and there—can make a big difference



SPENDING HOUR AFTER HOUR sitting down is associated with serious health problems, including an increased risk for certain cancers, cardiovascular conditions, type 2 diabetes, dementia, and feelings of depression and anxiety.

But research has increasingly shown that offsetting those dangers doesn't require hours of intense exertion. Both light exercise and just finding more reasons to get up and move throughout the day can make a significant difference in alleviating some of the risks of sedentary time.

"If you break up sitting with light activity every hour, it could add up to dropping your sitting time by over an hour a day," says David Raichlen, PhD, a professor of biological sciences and anthropology at the University of Southern California, who has studied the health effects of sedentary behavior.

What Exercise Can Do

A review of research that looked at nearly 12,000 older adults helped pinpoint the possible benefits of being more active. The review, in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2023, found that those who were sedentary for more than 12 hours a day were 38 percent more likely to die during the study period than those who were sedentary for about 10 hours a day. But getting at least 22 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity was enough to eliminate that excess risk of early death.

Still, building in a workout routine doesn't mitigate all of the downsides of sitting. The more time people spent inactive past 9½ hours, the higher their risk of developing dementia, according to a 2023 study published in the medical publication JAMA that followed 49,841 older adults for nearly seven years. People who were sedentary for 15 hours a day were more than three times as likely to develop dementia as those who were inactive for about 9 hours a day. And exercise didn't eliminate that risk.

The bottom line: No matter how much good exercise can do for you–and there's little that's better–it's still not enough to counteract the potentially harmful effects of lots of sitting. Some small tweaks to break up your desk-bound time can help.

How to Get Up More Often

The phrase "sitting is the new smoking" emerged after people started to realize how harmful it was to spend the day sitting in front of a computer at work before returning home to sit at a table and then in front of a television, says Alan Hedge, PhD, a professor emeritus in the Department of Human Centered Design at Cornell University in New York.

Whether or not you're working, though, the key is "getting some postural variety," he says. Here are some suggestions.

› **Try the 20-8-2 method.** If you have to sit for long stretches, Hedge suggests sitting for 20 minutes, standing for 8 minutes, and then taking a 2-minute break to walk around.

› **Front-load standing time.** To reduce overall sitting time, try to be on your feet more in the earlier hours of the day as you're working or doing chores around your home, Raichlen suggests. It's much harder to make up for a sedentary daytime at night, when you're already tired and want to relax.

› **Set a reminder.** Use your watch or phone at certain intervals to remind you to move around throughout the day.

› **Build in activity.** Anything you can do to reduce your sitting time adds up. Take phone calls while strolling (just watch your step, and consider using a hands-free headset or earphones), do household tasks while standing, and try to plan a walk after every meal.

What to Do While Sitting

Getting up and moving is important, but it's impossible to eliminate sedentary time completely. Yet even while you're sitting you can do things to help protect your physical and cognitive health.

› **Move while seated.** Sitting in ways that force you to think about your posture or help get your blood flowing may have positive results. Try using an active sitting chair, which forces you to balance and engage your core, Hedge says, or look into an under-desk pedaling device that lets you cycle a bit as you sit.

› **Keep your mind active.** When it comes to dementia risk, what you're doing while sedentary appears to have a big effect, Raichlen says. For example, watching TV significantly increases your risk, while more cognitively engaging activities like computer use appear to be protective.

LEARN

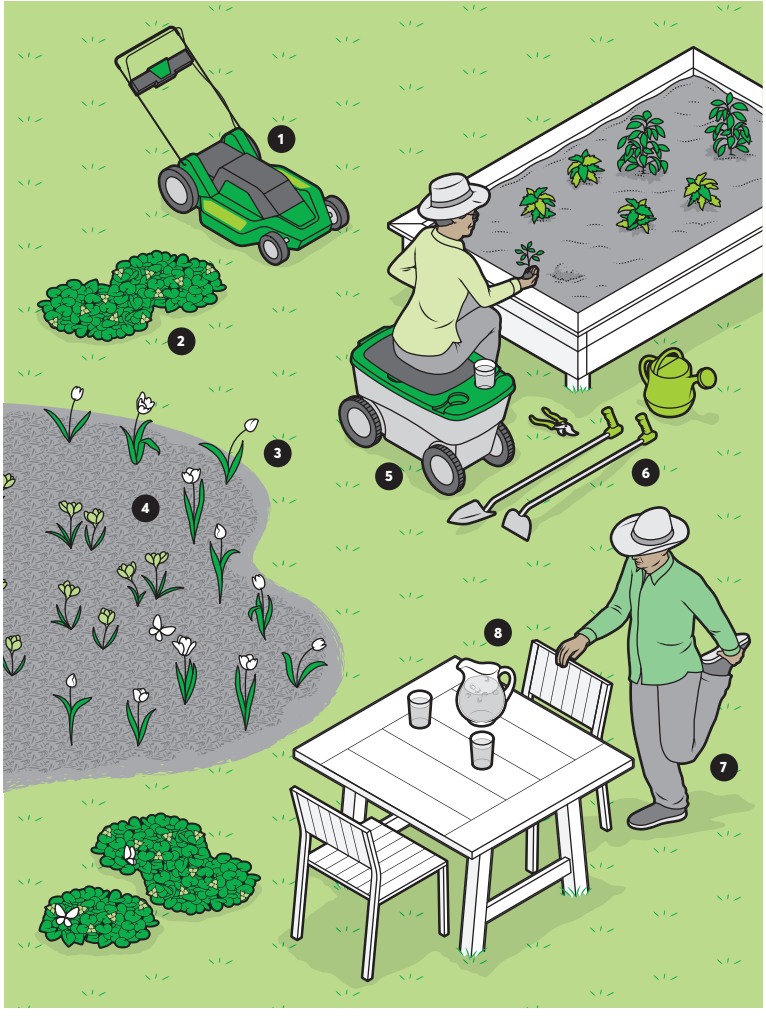
For more on exercise bikes, which can help you move even while sitting down, go to CR.org/exercisebikes.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Make Gardening Easier on Your Body

These tools and tips will take the pain out of caring for your yard

MAINTAINING YOUR LAWN AND GARDEN can bring beauty to your outdoor area. But it can also be physically challenging. Fortunately, there are a slew of ways to simplify and cut down on the work involved. And many of these tools and strategies are also easier on the environment. Here are tips from CR's ergonomics experts and from Jessica Vincent, PhD, community health outreach specialist for the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service in Little Rock.



1 MOW LESS
Taller grass is healthier, so cut your lawn to no less than 3 or 4 inches high. Instead of collecting clippings, use your mower's mulching mode, which deposits them back on your lawn—they're great fertilizer.

2 GET HELP WITH GRASS
Lawn not looking great? Your local Cooperative Extension service can help figure out whether there's an issue with your grass. In some cases, grass isn't even the best option for a yard. Native ground covers, like wild ginger, spread like grass but can eliminate mowing.

3 GO FOR PERENNIALS
Instead of annual flowering plants, which you must replace every year, perennials reemerge each year. Even better? Native perennials are suited to your climate, naturally resist local pests, and require less water.

4 WISE UP ABOUT WEEDS
In your garden beds, keeping the soil covered with mulch can help cut down on weed growth. A thick layer of wood mulch works well—for extra protection, you can also place a layer of shredded newspaper under the wood mulch, if you have it on hand. On your lawn, consider leaving the weeds alone. It's one less chore for you, and weeds can be good food for pollinators like bees and butterflies.

5 RAISE 'EM UP
If getting down on the ground to care for your flowers and veggies is hard, think about adding raised beds to your yard, or garden using containers. That way you can work while sitting comfortably on a chair or stool. A cart that doubles as a seat can be a good place to store tools you frequently use.

6 TWEAK YOUR TOOLS
Long-handled or telescoping tools can reduce the need to bend over or reach. If your hands aren't as strong as they once were, ratchet-type pruners require much less effort to operate. A hand truck is useful to have around if you need to reposition planters or move heavy bags of soil.

7 STRETCH AND MOVE OFTEN
Gardening can be a workout, so start each session with a few minutes of simple stretches. When you're working, take frequent breaks to move around and stretch.

8 STAY COOL
When working out in your yard on hot days, hydration is crucial, so sip fluid frequently. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses, apply sunscreen regularly, and stay in the shade when you can.

CR'S EXPERTS
Dana Keester and Paul Ritchey lead consumer experience and usability research projects at CR.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS PHILPOT

On Your Mind

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

I've read that multivitamins are good for my brain. Is that true?

It's unclear. In a study of more than 5,000 older adults, those who took a standard vitamin and mineral supplement daily for about two years had signs of slower age-related declines in thinking than those who received a placebo. That's encouraging, says Claire Sexton, DPhil, senior director of scientific programs and outreach for the Alzheimer's Association, but more research is needed. So right now, the group is "not ready to recommend widespread use of a multivitamin supplement to reduce risk of cognitive decline in older adults."

How can I tell if my walking shoes are too worn out?

It's time to replace walking shoes or sneakers used for exercise if they no longer feel comfortable or your feet hurt when you wear them, says podiatrist Mark Mendeszoon, DPM, a spokesperson for the American Podiatric Medical Association. Other tip-offs: if the rubber is wearing off the soles, the top or sides have holes, or you can easily bend a shoe in half so that the toe meets the heel. Walking shoes will last longer if you use them solely for exercise.

I want to cut down on meat. How can I get enough protein?

Older adults need 0.36 gram of daily protein per pound of body weight (54 grams if you weigh 150 pounds), though some experts think it's better to strive for about 50 percent more (up to 83 grams if you weigh 150). Plant foods like beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds can help you reach your protein goal. While a 4-ounce pork chop has 24 grams of protein and a 4-ounce hamburger has about 18 grams, a cup of tofu has 20 grams and a cup of cooked lentils has 18. Two tablespoons of smooth peanut butter has 7 grams. Dairy can also provide protein: 6 ounces of nonfat Greek yogurt has 17 grams of protein, and a half-cup of low-fat cottage cheese has 12 grams.

What can I do if there's a shortage of a drug I take daily?

Most common medications are available. But in the past several years, there have been shortages of some meds for chronic conditions, such as the blood-pressure-lowering drug valsartan (Diovan) and diabetes drugs such as semaglutide (Ozempic, Wegovy), dulaglutide (Trulicity), and liraglutide (Victoza). Fill prescriptions a few days before you run out so that you have time to talk with your pharmacist or doctor if an issue arises, says Erin Fox, PharmD, associate chief pharmacy officer at University of Utah Health. Ask whether there's another drug you can use if yours won't be available right away.

TALK TO US

HAVE QUESTIONS?
We'll answer those of general interest. Write to CRH, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703 or go to **CR.org/crh** to contact us by email.

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